

Interview H0081: with Thubten Wangbo [tib. thub bstan dbang po], (China, 8 July 1992) : Part No. 1 of 2

Thubten Wangbo was a monk official in the Tibetan government. He discusses going to the monk official school (Tse labdra) and becoming a monk official. He also discusses going to Beijing on a tour in 1953 and then remaining there to teach Tibetan at the Central Nationalities Institute.

This is how I first became a [Tse](#) labdra student. The government could take monks as a tax (tib. [traja](#) [grwa 'phyags]) from [Sendregasum](#) and from mushi jogsum. From each monastery, (the government) could conscript a certain number of students for the [Tse](#) labdra school. This number was divided between the various colleges and [khamtsen](#) [in each monastery]. There were also other village monasteries in Lhoka that send [traja](#) to the [Tse](#) labdra. These monasteries were called the [Tse](#) tshogba [tib. rtse tshogs pa]. So before I became a [tsidrung](#), I became a [Tse](#) labdra student.

In my case, once when there was a [traja](#), Gungru [khamtsen](#) [tib. [gung](#) ru khang tshan] of Ganden sent a monk to the [Tse](#) labdra. While in [Tse](#) labdra, he fell out of a window and died, so the [Yigtsang](#) office wrote to Gungru [khamtsen](#) many times saying that your monk in [Tse](#) labdra has died so send a replacement. But Gungru [khamtsen](#) was poor, had only a few monks, all of whom were northern nomads (tib. hor [hor]) so they had no more clever kids to send and they weren't able to send a replacement for 3 years. At this time, my father was a [Tseja](#) Chola [rtse phyag jo lags] [clerk in the Tseja] and he came to hear about this. So he went to the [khamtsen](#) and asked if they would accept his son [me] as their nominee for the [Tse](#) labdra. They said fine.

I didn't immediately become a monk. At Mönlam, the [khamtsen](#) monks lived at Benjor rabten [tib. dpal 'byor rab brtan]. It wasn't a big house and only held about 40-50 people. At this time, my family gave a [tshomja](#) to the [khamtsen](#) monks and put [Tse](#) labdra clothes on me. [Tse](#) labdra students wore a red chuba and a sogsha [tib. sog zhwa] [hat](#). So that is how I got into the [Tse](#) labdra. It was sort of "backdoor" [tib. ltag sgo], but not exactly.

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For the [mibab jenshu](#), one needs a candidate that is alert, clever and has no defects in senses. So since Gungru (khamtsen) was all Hor (nomads) and had no clever monks to send [I was sent].

Historically, it is said that the 5th Dalai Lama started the [Tse](#) labdra. Then it is said a fire broke out, and then the 7th Dalai Lama started it again and had a monastery constitution (tib. jayig [bca' yig]) made up.

Q

When did you become a [Tse](#) labrda student? Was it before the Sera War?

A

In the 40s. When the Sera war started, I was already in [Tse](#) labdra [so it was before 1947]. I was about 14 when the Sera war started.

The monks conscripted as Traja didn't have to give any money gifts. There was another category who asked to join and gave gifts-used their own funds-these were known as gerba [tib. sger pa]. Those who were conscripted were known as [shungba](#) [tib. gzhung pa]. There weren't many [gerpa](#) students since the school was extremely strict. If a [gerpa](#) student joined, he had to give tea and [droma dresi](#) to all the students and teachers as was the Tibetan custom when joining a private school [in Lhasa]. Our teachers were an official from the [Yigtsang](#) office, and one older monk from Möndröling [tib. smin grol gling] monastery called Lodrö Chösang [tib. blo gros chos bzang]. He was very learned and lived in Sharjenjog. The school taught grammar (tib. sum rtags), spelling [tib. ngag sgron], and a famous letter written by Nagarjuna [tib. bzhes springs]. The [Yigtsang](#) official only taught calligraphy. The full name of [Tse](#) labdra was [Tse](#) Rigne Lobdra Chenmo [tib. rtse rig gnas slob grwa chen mo]. There were only two government set up schools: the [Tse](#) labdra and the Tsigang.

Before I went to the [Tse](#) labdra I had studied privately at the Nyarongshar [tib. nang rong shag] school. The strict customs of the [Tse](#) labdra were all written in its constitution (jayig). When I entered school, the others in that class had already finished 3 years, so I was behind. ...

The [Tse](#) labdra was an avenue for poor monks to become powerful [kudrak](#). For example, [Kalön](#) Lama Temba Jayang [tib. bka' blon bla ma bstan pa 'jam dbyangs] and Dombo [tib. gdong por] both started as Traja monks. Dombo's father was an [adrung](#). My parents told

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me,"Study hard and be good and later you will become a [kudrak](#) and help your family and relatives."

I was a [shungba](#), so I didn't have to do anything for the monastery. The monks who came from monasteries were poor, not like the [chöndze](#) and rich monks.

I was from a middle class family. Many such families made their kids monks with the hope of having them become [tsidrung](#), but also many did not, since the discipline was very strict and there were many beatings. Most of the Traja were just common monks (tib. [tramang](#) [grwa dmang]). For example, one boy got so many beatings that he was unable to bear it and jumped out of the window. The discipline was so strict that we couldn't stand up higher than the genda's [tib. rgan bdag] [proctor] waist when he was present. And when the teacher was present we couldn't rise above his knees. So we were bent over. [This was when we met them walking, etc.]

In the early morning we had to go to school at three a.m. and start by saying prayers. If a student arrived after the first prayer, he got 3 nyugja hits. If you came during the last prayer, you get deja [tib. rta lcag] with a leather strap on the thigh. We didn't wear pants at [Tse](#) labdra, only the [meyog](#) [tib. smad g.yogs] [monk's skirt]. They had a way of wrapping their robe around their feet and in a way that the deflected the main force of the deja hit. ... The [Tse](#) labdra and Jagpori taught Tibetan religious texts, but the other schools just taught calligraphy. [Trindo says at his school which was called rgyal sgo gtong (the name of a house in the Ramoche [tib. rwa mo che] area) they taught math. Nyarongshar was a different school. It was first ka kha [alphabet], then ka shib [tib. ka zhib] then tshug shib [tib. tshugs zhib], then genyog [tib. rgan g.yog], then [genda](#) (different scripts and writing styles). At Nyarongshar when you wanted to move up to another level, you had to write a petition to the teacher just like government, so when you were completed with school you could write government style petitions well. The poor kids sat under the stairs. The chola's kids sat on the steps and the aristocrat's kids sat upstairs with the teacher.

Q

Did they teach any history or modern subjects in [Tse](#) labdra?

Q

No. ... but when I went to Peking to study, they did. In Tibet, neither in the monastery nor in private schools did they teach books. Normally they just taught the shape of letters [tib.

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yig gzugs]. For example, the book miwang togjö [tib. mi dbang rtogs brjod] was not allowed to be distributed by the government. It was forbidden [tib. spangs].

Q

Why?

A

I am not sure, probably because it talks about Tibet and China a lot.

Q

How long is the [Tse](#) labdra course.

A

Mine was 6 yrs, but there was no limit. It depended on your "backdoor" connections. If you had backdoor connections and a good patron (tib. gongren [mgo 'dren]), then you could make [tsidrung](#) in 4 years. In you had no backdoor, you could wait for years. There were some older students in their 30s-40s who were still in the [Tse](#) labdra. For example, the [Trunyichemmo](#) was the best kind of gondren. Monks and monasteries were under the [Yigtsang](#), and the [Yigtsang](#) chemmo [tib. yig tshang chen mo] ("also called yangchen") was also done by the [Yigtsang](#). It had 16 kinds of writing styles such as hor yig [tib. hor yig], lanza, and urdu. This text the Dalai Lama examined. These we had to learn in a month (before the exam). We just learned the shapes of the letters, not the meanings. On the right and left [of the exam] these scripts were used, and in the middle there was Tibetan. The paper [on which these were written] was big, about the size of a door. After we showed it to the Dalai Lama, we each got a roll of woolen woven cloth. Only the [shungba](#) got this, not the aristocrats. In the [Tse](#) labdra there was only 1 aristocratic students while I was there in school for 6 years.

Q

Did they give you food?

A

No. You had to get it on your own or from family. We made it ourselves. We ate some tea and [bag](#). If your family was wealthy, they might bring you some foodstuffs..

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There was also a [Yigtsang](#) labdra. The private applicants appealed to the [Yigtsang](#) for entrance into the [Yigtsang](#) labdra. The [Yigtsang](#) labdra carried with it [tsidrun](#) status. There was also a school in the Tsigang [for laymen]. They were called tsidru [rtsis phrug].

Q

Did they teach you [diu](#)?

A

No. We learned mainly Tibetan culture [tib. bod rig gnas], but not all. We learned some astrology [skar rtsis](about what could be done on different days). The early morning tse labrda chant melody [tib. gdang] [in the prayer meeting] is different from that used in [Sendregasum](#). It [the prayer meeting] lasts about 1 hour. Then we went to our rooms and ate. Then we went to school and then ate the noon meal.

I was put in by parents with the Möndröling teacher, so I ate with him. My home sent [tsamba](#) and other foods, but some kid's families gave money to the person they left their kids with. Some of these adults there had 2-3 kids eating with them. I stayed with several different people during my 6 years. We studied texts before the dinner meal.

Q

Did you have vows at this time?

A

The [Tse](#) labdra students were supposed to be monks with vows (rabjung or [domba](#)), but I didn't have anything. If you slept with women you were expelled. That was called trapa log [tib. grwa pa log].

Q

While you were a student there did you have any relations with the [khamtsen](#) [that sent you]?

A

No, but at Mönlam my family sometimes would give the [khamtsen](#) a [tshomja](#) with tea and [thukpa](#) and alms.

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Q

Did the [khamtsen](#) give you a share of the alms?

A

No. It was the poorest [khamtsen](#) in Ganden monastery, so it didn't. I heard that the richer ones did.

After my handwriting became good, while I was still a student, the [Yigtsang](#) used to send things to me to copy.

Then after some years I became a [tsidrung](#). At that time the Dalai Lama was in Yadrung. To do this I had to send a petition and a better [khata](#) scarf to the [Yigtsang](#) with examples of my writing like an exam. Then I went for the [mibab jenshu](#). There you just stand. You don't do anything but look dignified. Then after a few days they said yes or no. Basically it depended on giving money to the Yigtsang's Drunyichemmo. Some students went many times and never got it.

The first time I went up [to become a monk official] I didn't get it, but all the others in that [traja](#) got accepted as monk officials. So I stayed one year as a proctor (genda) in the [Tse](#) labdra. Then the next year I got it, but it wasn't worth much since the society was in turmoil. So there was the [new] Socialist School (tib. [jitso labdra](#) [spyi tshogs slob grwa]) and I decided to join it as one of the first three students. This was in 1952...[Trindola-The Socialist School had both students who didn't like the government and those who were poor and needed money. Some also were older. The first thing they did was start a jitsho bu'u-- police office-they hired Tibetans to sit around tea houses and listen to what was said. Lot of poor people were recruited for this.]

At first we studied in a tent. There was a good Chinese teacher who taught us Chinese. By the time I went to China, the school had increased to 5. I thought that now things were changing and the Chinese were going to be in power and there would be a change in society so I thought it would be good to go to China.

Q

Did the [Yigtsang](#) send you to school?

A

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No. If you went to the Chinese school it was considered terrible. They would never send you. I did it on my own. When I went to China I did it secretly. At this time I had no home. My parents had died and I was living with a relative. I joined the Youth Association [tib. gzhon nu tshogs pa] [the full name was Gyeje Shönu Sherig Thündrog Tsogpa [rgyal gces gzhon nu shes rig mthun grogs tshogs pa] and secretly went to China. I sent a letter from Metrogungga [tib. mal gro [gung](#) dkar] to my uncle saying I have gone to China. My uncle didn't treat me well. If my parents were alive and we were okay in income, I doubt I would have gone.

I had no thoughts of being a [tsidrung](#) and getting a high position and staying with the old government. I thought it was best to join the sarje (revolution) so I did this right from the start. So I went to China through the Youth Association. [trindola--at this time most were not real youths but mostly were adults]. This was a tour to see China. I joined the Youth Association in 1951.

The first Visiting Delegation (tib. tagor [tshogpa](#) [lta skor tshogs pa]) was called the "Gift Presenting Group" (tib. denbū [tsogpa](#) [rten 'bul tshogs pa]) because Liushar [tib. sne'u shar] was to give Mao a scarf]. Liushar was the (head of the group) (tib. tsogtso [tshogs gtso]). The second tour was the Youth Association Tour. That was us. When we reached Chamdo, Liushar was returning.

Ngawang Thöndub [tib. ngag dbang don grub] went to China in 1951. They [his colleagues] went without any [special] name for their group. In my group, most returned after the visit, but I stayed. They said if you want to return go or if you want to go to school here you can stay. Our leader was Shölkang Thubden Nyima [tib. zhol khang thub bstan nyi ma].

Q

Weren't you ever assigned to an office as a [tsidrung](#) official.

A

They sent me to the Construction Office [tib. ar po las khungs], but I was already a student and didn't go.

Q

Did you ask the [Yigtsang](#) to do this [become a student]?

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A

No. Things were already chaotic so I didn't. If you asked the [Yigtsang](#), they would say you couldn't go, so no one asked them. It taught Chinese only and was located next to the Tibet Cadre school [tib. bod las byed slob grwa]. Later when there were many students it was called the "Socialist School," (jitscho [labdra](#)).

Q

How did you know about the school?

A

I had a friend from Lhalung Surje [tib. lha lung zur lci] called Lodola [tib. blo rdor lags]. He said there is a Chinese teacher who spoke good Tibetan and was teaching Chinese and I'm going, so if you want to learn Chinese, why don't you go. So I went with him. No one said go there, nor did the Chinese invite people to go. I went quietly on my own.

Q

Was there salary?

A

Not when I was going. Later, there must have been.

Before I left China, my teacher [from Lhasa] came to China. He was one of many researchers sent to Tibet to investigate customs. They were dressed in soldiers clothes but really weren't soldiers. Later in China I realized that he wasn't a soldier. He was actually a genyen [layman with vows] and married. Yu Dashan's younger brother was in this group.

Q

Where did your livelihood come from then?

A

From my family. From my maternal uncle. He was the head of the Post office (tib. Drakang [brag khang]) at [Trapchi](#). While I was in China, the 1959 uprising occurred and my maternal uncle fled to India. So the household's things were all left there. So the

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neighborhood [office] wrote me that your uncle has fled and his possessions are here. But I didn't answer as I was afraid that I would be dragged in and considered a reactionary [tib. zhwa mo].

Q

What did people think in Lhasa in 1951 about all the events.

A

There were only two thoughts. One that revolution (sarje) was good. The poor would rise and all would be equal in livelihood. The other said it was terrible if there was revolution (tib. sarje [gsar brje]). This split occurred in China as well. Youths like change and so I thought it was good to join the Youth Association. Others thought that if I don't join I will be left behind, so did so. My thought was that if I go to China it will be fun. They give food, and I'll go to school. I didn't have any great, long-term profound plans. I thought it would be fun and useful since unless you knew spoken and written Chinese later it would be hard to find good work.

Most information on politics came from Muslims in tea houses. They had radios and so knew a little. Otherwise there was not much news.

Q

Did you know what the 17-Point Agreement was?

A

I had heard about it, but did not know what it contained. I was young, so only thought of going to China. I was about 20 years old then.

Q

Was there a newspaper?

A

There was only the Kalimpong newspaper of Tharchin Babu [tib. mthar phyin sba sbu].

Q

Did people say you were a red, etc?

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A

Yes. But not to my face. The kids who went to school were called "dolai labdra" () and "dayang labdra" (dayang students) [tib. rda yang slog grwa ba].

Q

How long did you live in China?

A

36 years. All my Chinese students were excellent in Tibetan. In 1955 I came to Tibet bringing my students for practical training. At this time the reforms hadn't been done so we couldn't stay with [miser](#), but on a second such trip after [democratic] reforms after 1959] the students stayed with the [miser](#). ... They asked me to stay for one year in Trungshö [ch. zhong xue] [the 1st middle school in Lhasa] so I did teaching there. It was about 1957.

There were about 30 in my Tour Group that went to China in 1952. The heads of the Tour delegation [tib. tshogs gtso] were Surkhang Khenjung [tib. zur khang mkhan chung], Shölkang Jidrunpla [tib. zhol khang rje drung] (Thubten nyima), [Kapshöba](#) Thöndrup [tib. ka shos don grub]. He committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. The people were from all regions of Tibet like Shigatse and Chamdo and Lhoka. Each of these had a leader [tib. tshogs gtso].

Q

Where did you visit?

A

Inner Mongolia, the Northeast and Shanghai. The trip took about 1 month.

Q

What propaganda did they tell you?

A

The point was to show how good China was so the youth would go back and tell others how great China was and that what other people had said was lies.

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I decided not to return but to go to school at the Minorities Institute (tib. mirig [labdra](#) [mi rigs slob grwa]). At first I was a student, then they needed a Lhasa speaker to teach Tibetan and they insisted I do this for a month. I kept saying no since I wanted to study Chinese. Finally I agreed to do it for 1 year. So I only studied in school for 6 mos. So that is how I became a teacher. Ngawang Thöndrup introduced me. So I learned my Chinese from my students.

In 1959 I did some research on linguistics.